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ABSTRACT

Many handicapped workers fail in competitive employment situations for social reasons rather than for the inability to perform required work tasks. Such individuals are usually those who need to be trained under conditions more closely matching those of the workplace. Thus, work-related social skills should be taught, at least in part, in work settings. Factors to be considered in making the decision to focus training on work-at-school experiences, competitive employment, or a combination of both, are the student's age, motivation, readiness to perform jobs, previous work experience, evidence of lack of skill, availability of work opportunities, level of administrative support, and adequate release time for teachers to develop and use work experiences for vocational training. Successful employment programs employ two strategies: reasonable accommodations by business (e.g., altering tasks), and training of social skills within normal work routines or in special training sessions. Systematic long-term follow-up should be a fundamental part of all employment training and placement programs, including on-side visits, interviews with the client, and follow-up with work supervisors and co-workers. (JW)

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DEVELOPING SOCIAL VOCATIONAL SKILLS IN HANDICAPPED INDIVIDUALS

There is considerable knowledge about how to teach handicapped persons to carry out work tasks. Research indicates that many handicapped persons can work competitively with performance levels approximating those of nonhandicapped workers. Despite these advances, an alarmingly high percentage of handicapped workers fail in competitive employment placements. For some, additional skill at work tasks is needed. However, many lose their jobs for social reasons, not because of their inability to perform work tasks (Greenspan & Shoultz, 1981; Hill & Wehman, 1979; Wehman, 1981). Work placement officers' reports are replete with accounts of aberrant social behavior of handicapped persons on the job. Just as frequently, these reports describe social deficiencies that concern employers.

Social Protocols—Not Easy to Teach

Developers of social skill curricula have been plagued by two persistent problems. First, social development cannot be treated simply as sets of skills that can be taught in isolation from other skills. Rather, social behavior must nearly always be understood within the context of other behaviors (e.g., language, play, work). In mathematics instruction, problems of a particular type can be presented repeatedly until mastery is obtained. However, it is rare that social curricula can be sequenced or taught in such a manner. For instance, when teaching a child to greet others, it would be inappropriate to continuously repeat the instruction: "We're going to say hello. When I say hello, you say hello." (Teacher) "Hello." (Child) "Hello," and so on.

The second problem is the relationship between the conditions under which a social skill is taught and the conditions in which it must be used. When arithmetic problems are taught with a workbook, they can reasonably be expected to be applied in a checkbook without much additional training. However, social skills are rarely applied by handicapped persons under conditions far removed from those in which they were taught. Of course, some students will apply skills broadly after nearly any condition of learning, but these students typically do not fail in employment. Persons who lose their jobs for social reasons are usually those who need to be trained under conditions which closely match those of the workplace. In other words, work-related social skills should be taught, at least in part, in work settings.

Work-at-School or Competitive Employment Training

The decision to focus training on work-at-school experiences, competitive employment, or both, rests on numerous factors.

1. *Age.* Legal age requirements for employment dictate that young students' experiences be limited to those arranged at school.
2. *Motivation.* A strong desire to work must either be present or developed before employment experiences are considered. Otherwise, loss of jobs due to lack of motivation could seriously damage the credibility of the program.
3. *Readiness to Perform Jobs.* Competitive employment demands performance at levels of quality and rate equal to other employees. There is some leeway with subsidized jobs but it is advisable that the performance of assigned tasks approximates the levels expected in competitive jobs.
4. *Previous Work Experience.* If students have not had previous work experience or have had unsuccessful experiences, it is advisable, regardless of age, to place them in work-at-school experience at least for a period of evaluation.
5. *Evidence of Lack of Skill.* a student is slow in performing daily tasks, is socially immature, or lacks basic motor adeptness in other areas of school work, he or she should begin work experience under close supervision in a school program.
6. *Availability of Work Opportunities.* Work experiences within the school depend upon cooperation from other staff. Those essential relationships must be developed and maintained through consistent effort by the teacher. Limited job opportunities in the community for high school students places greater reliance on work-at-school jobs or on subsidized work experiences.
7. *Administrative Support.* The school principal, special education director, and other teachers must understand that work experience entails instruction, not just time out from classes. Although work-study experiences have been accepted in the past, the requirement to provide instruction during that time departs radically from conventional notions of classroom instruction. Individual

This ERIC Digest is derived from a full-length publication, *Job Success for Handicapped Youth: A Social Protocol Curriculum*, by Joseph J. Stowitschek and Charles L. Salzberg, 1987. The publication is available from The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091, 703/620-3660. The full text provides suggestions for assessing social skills for work and curricula for school and employment settings. 62pp. Price, $11.00, CEC Member Price $9.35. Stock Number 321.

EC 200571

education program objectives should reflect work experience training and must count toward high school graduation requirements.

8. *Release Time.* Following from point number 7, teachers' time must be allocated to develop and use work experiences for vocational training. Initially, considerable time is needed to arrange work experiences at all levels of the continuum. In order for the teacher to provide direct training at work sites, she or he must be accepted as a daily work supervisor. Otherwise, training may be intrusive in the work setting. An alternative is to work through the regular supervisors and coworkers at the sites. However, that requires considerable consulting and monitoring time and a high degree of collaboration.

Two Strategies for Solving Social Problems at Work

When a gap exists between an individual's skills and the requirements of a job, the employment specialist may broach the situation from two directions. One is to alter the job to minimize the need for the skills that are deficient (the accommodation approach). The other is to teach skills that are deficient (the training approach). In fact, successful employment programs for handicapped individuals employ both strategies.

Strategy 1: Accommodations by Business. Businesses can make accommodations for employees who lack some specific skills. Jobs can be altered to eliminate specific tasks that present difficulties, to minimize social demands, and to increase the amount of supervision.

Strategy 2: Training Social Skills on the Job. When possible, it is more efficient to train social skills within the normal work routines because skills can be learned in exactly the circumstances in which they are needed. This way, staff will not be burdened with add-on training sessions. Moreover, some skills can be taught only as part of the usual work day.

Unfortunately, all skills may not be trained within the normal flow of work activities. Some social skill training would disrupt business operations. For example, teaching someone to respond appropriately to emergencies would best be taught with simulations during special sessions before or after work. Creating emergencies in order to provide learning opportunities would be very disruptive during rush hour periods. Social behaviors that call for situations that would be offensive to customers or coworkers (e.g., handling abusive language or responding to ridicule) are also best taught in special sessions rather than within the regular work day. Special training sessions may also be called for when a skill is needed for a sporadic or infrequently occurring situation.

Finally, special training sessions are called for when training must be conducted at a level of intensity beyond that which is practical in the normal flow of work events.

After Training: Leaving Something Behind

It is very frustrating when a worker trained and placed weeks ago, who appeared to be doing quite well, is suddenly fired. Unfortunately, this occurs commonly in employment placement and training programs. Ford, Dineen, and Hall (1984) reviewed competitive employment follow-up studies with mentally retarded workers. They found that performance deterioration over time after job placement was common, even in highly systematic, intensive employment training programs. The outcome of employment preparation programs that completely abandon handicapped workers after an initial training period will frequently be failure. This is a dilemma! Employment trainers cannot stay at a job site forever to help a handicapped worker adapt to a changing environment. However, there are ways to approach this problem.

First, workers who possess a proficient repertoire of vocational-social skills will have more tools to adapt to changing job demands. Second, long-term systematic follow-up should be a fundamental part of all employment training and placement programs.

Follow-up should include on-site visits, interviews with the worker, and brief checks with work supervisors and coworkers. Follow-up checks should occur frequently at first and gradually decrease over time if the worker is doing well. Finally, it would be advantageous if an established employee in the business site could serve as an on-going trainer and advocate for the handicapped worker. A coworker in this role could provide an entre for the new worker to the social networks that exist among employees. He or she could keep an eye out for any social or production-related deficits of the handicapped worker and try to correct them. Last, if difficult problems arise, he or she could notify the employment training program staff so that they might intervene to prevent job failure.

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